

South Central Indiana: Charming and inviting year 'round.

By Sally Campbell Grout

Is there a “best time” to visit the picturesque communities that dot South Central Indiana? That depends on your point of view. With their breathtaking architecture, incredible views, and enticing activities, you’re going to enjoy them any time. But if you time your visit to coincide with one of the area’s fabulous festivals, you might find South Central Indiana is more fun than you’d imagined.

Columbus: Incredible architecture and family fun.

Why do architecture students—and fans—flock to Columbus, Indiana? Because the city is filled with buildings designed by some of the world’s most renowned architects. The First Christian Church, designed by Eliel Saarinen, was completed in 1942, and ushered in the beginning of the city’s commitment to modern architecture. With the completion of the Schmitt Elementary School in 1957, the Cummins Engine Foundation offered to pay the architect’s fee for any new school that was designed by an architect from a supplied list; the program was later expanded to include other public buildings. The result: a city with structures designed by I.M. Pei, Harry Weese, and other great architects. To see them, reserve your spot on a one- or two-hour tour by calling the Columbus Area Visitors Center (800-468-6564). (You can also register on line.) Or, take a self-guided walking or driving tour.

When the crew under age 12 or so has seen enough architecture, they’ll be ready for Kidscommons (812-378-3046), the Columbus children’s museum. With its new location and an additional 10,000 square feet, Kidscommons has plenty of fun for kids and the grownups accompanying them. Among the areas to play: a climbing wall that’s a replica of the building’s façade, where climbers use traditional wall hand and footholds—as well as windowsills and door frames—to climb their way to the roof; an early childhood garden; and “The Power Outlet,” a technology lab that was designed by kids for kids.

If you time your visit for October 7-8, 2005, you can join Columbus in celebrating Ethnic Expo (800-468-6564). This festival, founded in 1984, celebrates the varied ethnic heritage of Columbus with international food and an international marketplace, entertainment, children’s activities, a Volksmarch, parade, and fireworks.

Brown County: Lovely to look at, exciting to hear.

While it looks lovely in spring pastels, Brown County (800-753-3255) is at its most striking when it’s dressed in fall colors. Perhaps that’s why from September 9-October 23, 2005 Brown County indulges residents and

guests in an autumn celebration called the Art of Fall Colors in Brown County. Visit during this time to enjoy fine arts and crafts, gallery strolls, fried biscuits, baked apple butter, and, of course, those incredible, colorful leaves. This is also when you can take a Brown County Log Cabin Tour, a self-guided tour of five private log homes.

Of course, Brown County has plenty to offer whenever you visit. At the T.C. Steele State Historic Site in Nashville (812-988-2785), you'll see more than 70 original T.C. Steele paintings, the studio, house and gardens. You're also welcome to hike in the 92-acre nature preserve.

If all that hiking leaves you hungry, you'll find several places to enjoy hearty meals in Nashville, such as Nashville House (877-374-3317), which is known for its fried biscuits and baked apple butter; and The Ordinary (812-988-6166), where your entry through a speak-easy door takes you to the only downtown tavern and its delicious specialty sandwiches, lunches, and dinners.

In some circles, Brown County is celebrated as much for its sound as it is its looks. Bill Monroe, considered the Father of Bluegrass Music, grew up in Kentucky, but fell in love with Brown County. That love is still felt in Bean Blossom. In 1966, Monroe founded the Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival, which still takes place annually in the summer. In 1984, he opened Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Hall of Fame & Country Star Museum (812-988-6422), also in Bean Blossom. Today, visitors can learn about Monroe and Bluegrass beginnings, and see photos, instruments, clothing, and memorabilia of many Bluegrass and Grand Ole Opry greats. October 6-9, 2005, Bean Blossom celebrates the 6th Annual WM Bentley Hillbilly Wagon Train Jam with more than 100 mules, horses and covered wagons, along with food, crafts, and free bluegrass music.

Madison: the place for a long, leisurely stroll

As home to Indiana's largest historic district, Madison (800-559-2956) certainly has plenty to see. But what's surprising is just how much. More than 133 blocks of the country's most notable 19th century architecture, all of which are on the National Register of Historic Places, stretch through this Indiana community. But Madison is about more than days gone by; this charming spot is home to several cozy places to stay, unique shops to explore, great places to eat, and local wineries to sample. In the gardens surrounding Lanthier Winery, join in the 5th Annual Hunter's Moon Celebration (812-273-2409) October 8, 2005. Enjoy free garden tours, workshops, wine tasting, and plant giveaways.

Vincennes: Celebrate the frontier.

Vincennes (800-886-6443) played a key role in Indiana's and the nation's early days. Founded in 1732, it was the hub of the American frontier and

served as the capital of the Indiana Territory. You can get a feeling for life in its early days by exploring the “Mile of History” where several sites are preserved. Vincennes State Historic Sites (812-882-7422) incorporate several locations, buildings, and eras to reflect the area’s rich heritage. Some not-to-be-missed destinations: Grouseland, the home of William Henry Harrison from 1803-1812; Old Cathedral Complex, Indiana’s oldest Catholic Church; and George Rogers Clark National Historic Park, a large granite memorial commemorating the conquest of the Old Northwest Territory.

History lessons come to life November 5-6, 2005 during Muster at Wabash (812-882-7422). This annual event features War of 1812 regiments, period craftsmen, military drills, and battle reenactments.

Montgomery: a peaceful community with lively activities.

Gasthof Amish Village (812-486-4900) is the gateway to the area’s Amish community. And what a wonderful introduction it is. Visitors here can enjoy hearty meals and homemade bread at the Gasthof Amish Restaurant and Bakery, stay at the inn, shop in the village, and peruse the flea markets that take place Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays May through October from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. During the Gasthof Fall Festival October 22-23, you’ll find even more food and fun. Activities include flea markets, crafts, farm demonstrations, apple butter making, wagon rides, and gospel music.

Metamora: a canal and so much more.

In Metamora, you’ll find Whitewater Canal State Historic Site (765-647-6512), where you can glide down Indiana’s only operational canal, pass through the nation’s only working covered aqueduct, and see 1800s machinery at work in the Grist Mill. You can also spend the day exploring the shops and restaurants, and refuel at the Thorpe House Country Inn (765-647-5425), which calls itself an “Eatery, Sleepery, Shoppery.” Be prepared to join the celebration if you visit October 7-9, 2005, during the Canal Days Trader’s Rendezvous (765-647-2109). This annual event, a Hoosier favorite, presents hundreds of vendors, artists, and craftsmen.

Lawrence County: Limestone Country

Travel the United States, and you’re sure to see a building made from Indiana limestone. The Pentagon, the Empire State Building, and the Chicago’s Tribune Tower are among the structures to feature this Indiana product. Travel through Lawrence County (800-798-0769), in the heart of Indiana’s “stone belt” and you’re likely to see lots more. You can even see it below the ground when you visit Bluespring Caverns Park in Bedford (812-279-9471) and take a Mystery River tour. Bluespring Caverns also offers gemstone mining, a gift shop, group tours, and overnight adventures. Lawrence County is also home to Spring Mill State Park in

Mitchell (812-849-4129), where the pioneer village gives you a glimpse into Indiana's past. The Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom Memorial, also at the park, honors the Lawrence County native who was one of the original seven Mercury astronauts, selected in 1959. He died tragically in a launch pad fire in what would have been the first manned flight test of the Apollo capsule.

Spring Mill State Park also hosts the Spring Mill Fall Craft Show (812-849-4081), November 12, 2005. This annual show has more than 40 vendors, handmade crafts, and a dining room with home-style cooking.

For more information on South Central Indiana communities, attractions, and festivals, and for fun fall destinations statewide, visit enjoyindiana.com.